Speech for the
Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada,
Vic Toews, Q.C.
Main Spending Estimates
Ottawa, Ontario
16 May 2006

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Introduction

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am pleased to meet the members of the Justice Committee to discuss the main spending estimates of the Department of Justice.

Joining me today is my Deputy Minister, John Sims.

Present Environment

The Department of Justice plays a vital role in Canadian society. It promotes Canada's rights, freedoms, and laws; it provides high-quality legal counsel to the Government of Canada; and it ensures that Canada's system of justice is accessible, efficient, and fair.

The work we do at the Department of Justice has a very real impact on the lives of individual Canadians. Through our work on policies and legislation, we strive to create safer, healthier communities, which benefit us all.

As Canadians, we have always taken pride in our democratic society, our low crime rates, and our safe communities. I'm sure that most of us remember a time when we left our homes unlocked, and felt safe letting our kids play outside unattended.

But over the generations, our society changed. Today, we lock our doors. We are more watchful over our children. We recognize the dangers they face, dangers such as swarming, gangs, and drugs.

While Canada's justice system has evolved over the years, its evolution has not kept pace with Canadian society, and it is now facing increased pressure to adapt to the needs of 21 st century Canada.

That is why Canadians voted for change. Canada's justice system needs new solutions to our modern challenges.

The new Government has laid out its agenda for change, through five key priorities. They are: passing the *Federal Accountability Act*, cutting the GST, making our communities safer by cracking down on gun, gang, and drug crime, giving parents a choice in child care, and establishing a Patient Wait Times Guarantee.

As Minister of Justice and Attorney General, I will be working closely with my colleague, the Minister of Public Safety, Stockwell Day, to deliver on the new government's priority of making our streets and communities safer by tackling crime.

Today I'd like to discuss some of our new government's priorities for strengthening our justice system. I am confident that the actions we take to achieve these priorities will result in reforms that will mean everyone—particularly the most vulnerable members of society—can feel safe and secure in their communities.

The first thing that must change is the way we deal with serious offenders. It is time for Canada to get tough on violent crime. This is an issue that Canadians want addressed and the new Government is committed to ensuring serious consequences for serious crime.

But locking up tougher penalties for criminals is are just part of the solution. We also recognize that the most effective way to reduce crime and victimization is to prevent it from ever happening. That is why we are also committed to supporting crime prevention initiatives that will strike at the root causes of criminal behaviour. We will give young people the knowledge and tools to make good decisions so they can avoid the factors that place them at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

First Steps—New Legislation

Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to say that we have already begun to take action on our commitment to strengthen Canada's justice system. Earlier this month, I tabled two Bills in the House of Commons that will reform our laws so that serious crimes are met with significant consequences.

Conditional Sentences

One Bill deals with sentencing and will put an end to the use of conditional sentences—including house arrest—for serious and violent offences.

The reforms in this Bill will tighten up the law, removing the option for serious violent and sexual offenders to receive a conditional sentence. They will ensure a cautious and more appropriate use of conditional sentences, reserving them for less serious offences that pose a lower risk to community safety.

Mandatory Minimum Penalties

The other Bill we introduced will toughen sentences for crimes involving firearms by enhancing the mandatory minimum penalty provisions of the *Criminal Code*. Under the proposed legislation, serious offences involving firearms will be subject to very tough sentences.

If an offence is gang-related, or if a restricted or prohibited firearm such as a handgun is used, the minimum penalty will be: five years on a first offence; seven years if the accused has one prior conviction for a firearm-related offence; and ten years if the accused has more than one prior conviction for firearm-related offences.

Other firearm-related offences, such as firearms trafficking and smuggling, or the new offence of robbery where a firearm is stolen, will also be subject to higher escalating minimum penalties.

With these two Bills, the new government is meeting its commitment to protect Canadian families and communities by tackling gun, gang and drug violence. We will be better equipped to fight organized crime and keep dangerous offenders off our streets.

Age of Protection

In addition to these sentencing reform Bills, later this Spring, we will undertake the first step in our plan to protect children. We will table a Bill that will raise the age of consent for sexual relations from fourteen to sixteen years of age, and re-name it as the age of protection.

This change will bring us in line with most of the world. It is long overdue, and is particularly important in the age of the Internet when young people are targeted by cyber predators.

Next Steps—Justice Priorities

These are bold first steps in reform of the law. In addition to this and other legislation, we are developing enhanced strategies for law enforcement, crime prevention, and correctional services, as we address Following these first three Bills, Mr. Chairman, we will address a number of other key justice issues that are of serious concern to Canadians.

National Drug Strategy

One of these issues is drugs. The number of marijuana grow-ops has increased dramatically in Canada, spreading into suburban and rural communities. The production and distribution of drugs such as crack cocaine, crystal meth, and ecstasy has increased as well.

The time has come to get tough on make more serious efforts to clean up our streets by tackl ing drug crime. We must clean up our streets and help to make We must work to ensure the safety and health of our young people safer and healthier, by helping them make the right choices to stay away from illegal drugs. In this vein, we have made it clear that we have no intention of decriminalizing drugs, because we want to send the right message to young people about their dangers .

The sentencing reforms I mentioned earlier, will play an important role in tackling major drug crime. In addition, we will look to:

- prevent the decriminalization of marijuana;
- make precursor chemicals of crystal meth, such as pseudoephedrine, harder to get;
- introduce a national drug strategy with particular emphasis on youth. This strategy will encompass all drugs, not just marijuana, in implementing a nationwide awareness campaign to dissuade young people from using drugs;
- expedite deportation of non-citizens convicted of drug trafficking, drug importation, or running grow operations; and
- restore the Canada Ports Police.

Street Racing

Another crime that we need to deal with is street racing. Our cities are not race tracks, and the time has come to get rid of the racers who pose a threat to the safety of our citizens. Through criminal justice reform, we will send a strong message that racing will no longer be tolerated on Canadian streets.

Despite the prospect of serious bodily harm or death, this dangerous phenomenon continues in Canada. It is clear that people who engage in street racing have no regard for their own safety or the safety of others. The stories are tragic. Over the past few years, there have been a number of highly publicized incidents where drivers, their passengers, and innocent victims have been killed. Since January alone, three men in Vancouver, one in Edmonton, and a Toronto taxi-cab driver have all allegedly been killed because of street racing.

The Government of Canada will work to keep these criminals off our streets. We are committed to

combating this dangerous activity by getting tough on those offenders who so recklessly endanger human life.

Parole and Bail Reform

In addition to tackling these crime issues, we will also reform the law with respect to our parole and bail processes. Parole must be a privilege to be earned, not a right to be demanded.

We will examine a number of options on this front, including:

- creating a presumption-of-dangerous-offender designation for anyone convicted and sentenced to federal custody for three violent or sexual offences;
- repealing section 745.6 of the *Criminal Code*—the so-called "Faint Hope Clause"—that allows a criminal serving a life sentence to apply for early parole;
- replacing statutory release (the law entitling a prisoner to parole after serving two-thirds of his sentence) with earned parole;
- toughening parole provisions once you have been convicted of committing a crime while on parole, and eliminate parole for life after the third such conviction;
- preventing courts from giving extra "credit" for pre-trial custody for persons denied bail because of their past criminal record or for violating bail; and
- creating a reverse onus for bail hearings for anybody charged with an indictable firearms offence.
- On all of these initiatives, I look forward to working with Parliament, law enforcement, corrections, prosecutors, and my provincial counterparts to develop effective new policies.

Crime Prevention

One last key issue I wish to discuss is crime prevention. Our government, as I have discussed, is focused on tackling the pressing issues of gun crime, criminal gangs, and drugs. We will ensure that serious crime means serious time.

But this Government also recognizes that it is equally important to prevent criminal behaviour before it has a chance to take root. We will address the root causes of crime by supporting communities and families with effective social programs and sound economic policies. Such efforts would include:

- working with the provinces, municipalities, police, and community leaders in areas threatened by gun and gang violence to support programs which reach out to young people. We must help them recognize the dangers of violence in their schools and community, so that they reject gang and gun violence;
- supporting results-oriented, community-based initiatives for addictions treatment, training, and rehabilitation of those in trouble with the law; and
- investing in community-based, educational, sporting, cultural, and vocational opportunities for young people at risk.

By working with the provinces, territories, and other partners, this Government will support solutions that will help end the cycle of violence that can lead to broken communities and broken lives.

Budget Expenditures

I am pleased to note, Mr. Chairman, that *Budget 2006* reflects the Government of Canada's

commitment to crack down on crime. Highlights from the budget include:

- $161 million for 1,000 more RCMP officers and federal prosecutors to focus on such law-enforcement priorities as drugs, corruption, and border security (including gun smuggling).
- $37 million for the RCMP to expand its National Training Academy (Depot) to accommodate these new officers and build the capacity to train more officers in the future.
- Funds S set aside funds to expand Canada's correctional facilities to house the expected increase in inmates as a result of changes in sentencing rules.
- $20 million for communities to prevent youth crime with a focus on guns, gangs, and drugs.
- $26 million to give victims a more effective voice in the federal corrections and justice system; to give victims greater access to services (such as travel to appear at parole hearings).

Budget 2006 presents a balanced approach to law and order spending. I believe these investments will help to strengthen our justice system so that it better meets the needs of our modern Canadian society.

Conclusion

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I wish to thank you and your committee members for the important work you do. It is an honour for me to take part in this process as Canada's newest Minister of Justice.

As I mentioned at the outset, Canada's system of justice contributes to the well-being of Canadians in many ways—but it also faces many challenges.

I believe that these initiatives, which we will pursue over the coming months, will help to modernize Canada's justice system. By getting tough on crime—as well as addressing the root causes of crime—we will make Canada a safer place to live.

I welcome your questions and look forward to your feedback. Thank you.

Date Modified: **2008-04-14**